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SUBJECT: PRE-ELECTION PERSPECTIVES FROM KURUNEGALA,
POLONNARUWA, AND TRINCOMALEE DISTRICTS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead. Reason: 1.4(b, d).

[1](#)1. (U) Summary. Poloff and Pol FSN met on October 25-27 with community members in Kurunegala district in North Western province, Polonnaruwa district in North Central province, and Trincomalee district in Eastern province to discuss the political climate in the weeks before the November 17 presidential election. Urban professionals, Tamils, and Muslims overwhelmingly expressed support for United National Party candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe, whom they believe will improve the economy, reinvigorate the peace process, and expedite tsunami reconstruction. Rural agriculturists, on the other hand, largely seem to support Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) candidate and current Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse. End Summary.

Kurunegala: Professionals Fearful That Voters Will Choose
Style Over Substance

[1](#)2. (U) Poloff and pol FSN traveled to Kurunegala district on October 25 to discuss the November 17 presidential campaign with local residents. Kurunegala town, approximately 93km northeast of Colombo, is majority pro-UNP. There is a 50/50 split in the more rural areas of the district. Undecided voters are worried most about jobs and opportunities for the youth. Other issues in Kurunegala are access to health care and clean water, environmental protection, attention to poverty and ethnic divides, and a solution to political corruption and cronyism.

[1](#)3. (U) A group of professionals from Kurunegala--including a physician, an attorney, and an engineer--expressed concern that voters would reject Wickremesinghe's forward-leaning outlook for Sri Lanka in favor of Rajapakse's "pretty smile" and the grassroots outreach of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the chauvinist Sinhalese party allied with the SLFP. One interlocutor described a speech on economics the Prime Minister read to a gathering of businessmen in Kurunegala. Rajapakse stumbled over the words, saying that he did not know the subject and that the people must teach him. The interlocutor said that Rajapakse's lack of basic economic knowledge was a dangerous combination with the country's grassroots population, the poor but largely self-sufficient farmers who are economically uneducated, because fewer people would question potentially destructive policies. Others in the group said that the grassroots are the kingmakers of the country, and they have not experienced the increase in the cost of living the way the lower-middle class city dwellers have. The professionals said that the farmers, who care more about the productivity of their land than about the wider economy, view urban-bred Wickremesinghe as never having known the hardships they have faced. The Kurunegala interlocutors complained that the UNP is not communicating to the villagers Wickremesinghe's plan for farmers' benefits, nor are party members addressing trade unions in the area. The professionals praised Wickremesinghe's plan to increase foreign investment and international trade but compared him to medicine, good for the body yet difficult to swallow, observing that he lacks the charm to match his opponent's propaganda and win over SLFP and JVP diehards.

Polonnaruwa: The JVP is Bad for the Economy

[1](#)4. (U) In a meeting on October 25, members of the Polonnaruwa Chamber of Commerce in Hingurakgoda town, approximately 170km northeast of Colombo, told poloff that the future of Sri Lanka depends on a government that does not include the JVP. District businessmen said that Rajapakse is harmless, and could even understand the needs of the populace, but predicted he would be no more than a puppet of the JVP if he were to come to power. Asserting that the JVP has a history of opposing policies attempted by incumbent President Kumaratunga and is plagued by short-term thinking, the Polonnaruwa businessmen opined that the JVP would run the government behind the scenes by trial and error--for example, implementing protectionist tariffs to see the result--while the economy collapses. In addition to not having experience with running a government, the JVP appears to be set on war with the Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the district

businessmen said, adding that a government-provoked war would cause the international community to shun Sri Lanka and halt the trade of foreign commodities and raw materials. Wickremesinghe, on the other hand, would focus on long-term foreign investments and trade agreements that would help young businesses, they suggested. The businessmen expressed concern that because Polonnaruwa is largely agricultural, votes are likely to be influenced by the largesse the SLFP has provided to that sector, without considering Wickremesinghe's promise to give all farmers permanent deeds to their land and provide more land to the younger generation.

Trincomalee: Voters Disconnected but Highly Opinionated

15. (U) Election fever in Trincomalee town, on Sri Lanka's northeastern coast, appeared relatively restrained on October 26-27. Poloff and pol FSN observed that a rally for Rajapakse, who visited Trincomalee on October 26, did not attract a large crowd. Many of the attendees appeared to be JVP supporters bused in from other areas. One interlocutor explained that few townspeople rally around the JVP. Another interlocutor observed that there is no "get out the vote" activity for any party, saying that people prefer to spend money on survival rather than on campaigning. The LTTE presence is not as obvious as in polls past, local residents reported; the LTTE closed its political field office in Trincomalee and has announced that it will not interfere with the movement of voters. Military and police checkpoints have increased exponentially since the election date was announced, many near schools, markets, and private homes. After dark, the streets are deserted in a town that used to have a vibrant nightlife.

16. (U) In contrast to Kurunegala and Polonnaruwa, voters in Trincomalee are divided along ethnic rather than class lines. The Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhalese communities each make up a third of Trincomalee's population, and this ethnic mix, combined with an intense security presence, tangential LTTE influence, and a focus on tsunami reconstruction, serve to make the district a hotbed of diverse political opinions. Yet community members and interlocutors from various NGOs and international agencies claim that people in Trincomalee are uninterested in the presidential election. Tamil voters in Trincomalee feel disconnected from national politics, complaining that Colombo has shown little interest in advancing the peace process or making available tsunami reconstruction aid, the two most important issues in the district. Most told us that neither Wickremesinghe nor Rajapakse offers their community much hope for a long-term resolution to the conflict. Some Tamils indicated grudging support for Wickremesinghe for having been instrumental in the Cease-fire Agreement, but many are unlikely to go to the polls unless the LTTE or its parliamentary supporter, the Tamil National Alliance, instruct them to do so.

17. (U) Muslims enjoy greater political participation but are not a monolithic voting bloc. Our interlocutors expect more Muslims to vote for Wickremesinghe than for Rajapakse, especially since the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress leader has endorsed the UNP candidate. Muslim residents told us that they view Rajapakse as more sympathetic to the interests of the Sinhalese majority. One NGO representative noted that voters in Trincomalee are more interested in parliamentary elections, which would provide the opportunity for people to select several new lawmakers as their voice in Colombo.

Comment

18. (C) Poloff's brief discussions with voters in these districts seem to confirm what we already suspected: that business people and members of ethnic minorities are more likely to favor the UNP candidate's stance on economic policy and the peace process than his SLFP opponent. That said, even Wickremesinghe's supporters expressed substantial doubt that their candidate can effectively communicate his vision to the population at large. (One UNP booster in Colombo has told us that his candidate is being advised "not to talk so much" while out on the stump.) The fact that educated professionals, businessmen, and aid workers overwhelmingly prefer Wickremesinghe is not surprising, but whether this segment of society has the numbers to outweigh farmers, Sinhalese chauvinists, and other Rajapakse supporters remains to be seen.

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